

**An Untitled Exploration of Character and Power Distribution**  
**In Some of the Work of David Foster Wallace**

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On a whole, David Foster Wallace's fiction, specifically his first novel, *Broom of the System* (1987) and his collection of short stories, *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men* (1999), delve into questions surrounding the power of narration and language and the psychological complexity of not only gender relations, but human interaction generally. Both of these fictive works use mind-bending literary tactics to depict dynamic female characters while also successfully avoiding simplification of their voices or robbing them of independent power. In *Broom of the System*, the arranger and narrator cultivate a connection with Lenore that respects her desire for silence, and ultimately frees her from her prison of language. In *Brief Interviews*, the power and characterization of the interviewer is displaced throughout her selections despite her silence within the diegesis, while the arranger ultimately subjugates her power to emphasize the general human condition. Both of these fictional pieces, through their fragmentation and shifting power hierarchy, encourage readers to consider the ultimate power of the narrator over characters and reality in relation to gender interaction, and more generally, individual control over one's life.

Wallace's essay collection, *A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again* (1997), maintains similar tone and subject matter but contrasts greatly from his fiction. While his two fictional pieces call into question (and even satirize) the inherent narcissistic quality and the fault of scope of first person point of view, both "A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again" and "Getting Away from Already Being Away from It All" are mediated by the first person character-narrator of Wallace himself. While *Broom* and *Brief Interviews* specifically explore issues of exclusively functional, dehumanized characters, "Getting Away" makes use of the Native Companion, who Wallace uses exclusively for her characteristic of otherness.

The exploration of this contrast is not meant to call attention to which mode produces a more honest narrative, but rather, inevitably highlights the relationship between our understanding of life, and different modes of being, and their representation in language. While Wallace's fiction is notoriously challenging, his non-fiction was amply better received and successfully sold to the public (Max 228). The selection of works from the genres of the novel, short story collection, and non-fiction essay is meant to highlight the differences in reader expectations, authorial voice, and formal approach to similar themes. In both of the fictional pieces, Wallace endeavors to consider intricate power and gender relations while remaining conscious of his own inescapable masculinity while his essays celebrate the humor and struggle of this inescapability and his artfully constructed connection with readers incites them to do the same. Overall, the comparison of the three works reveals the immense authority of narrator over both diegesis and characterization, or with the non-fiction pieces, reality and human representation, while emphasizing the isolation of the individual human experience and the tensions inherent in our relations with others.

## Section 1: On Telling as Robbing Control

Wallace's own senior thesis, *Broom of the System*, takes up all of these issues in the form of the fluid, yet fragmented, novel. Through a displacement of narration and character roles, David Foster Wallace maintains an ambiguity around the nature of Lenore Beadsman III, who is convinced she is a largely powerless character in a narrative. Wallace plays with the character-author, reality-fiction relationship by granting authorial control within the plot to Lenore's Great Grandmother, Lenore Beadsman I, who regulates Lenore III's life on a disturbing number of levels. With this, Rick Vigorous, Lenore's insecure boyfriend, dominates the narration of Lenore's story, mediating her experience through his own narcissistic lens. *Broom of the System* is a disjointed narrative, affected by dominating characters such as Lenore I and Rick Vigorous, and organized by some unseen arranger<sup>1</sup>, who ultimately maintains an ambiguous conclusion. Through this ambiguity, Wallace is able to free Lenore from struggle with language, humanizing and complicating her and, ultimately, releasing her from her struggle with authenticity. Wallace's utilization of the arranger, and displacement in general, allows for him, as masculine author, to remain distanced from Lenore, further emphasizing the important connection between narration and power. The issue of control and Lenore I begins with Lenore Beadsman Sr. – who Wallace uses to represent the death grip of family expectations and legacy, adding a very literal twist.

Lenore Beadsman Sr. is an occupying, yet invisible, presence throughout the story. Lenore's position as minor character is juxtaposed with her great power over Lenore Junior, a dominance that jumps into another register. Initially, Lenore's power is depicted as character-to-character power, as she reigns as the head of the dysfunctional Beadsman family. Characterized

exclusively through first person character accounts, Great Grandma Lenore was a student of Wittgenstein and “believes everything is words” and who maintains special interest in her great granddaughter, Lenore Beadsman Junior (73). Bloemker describes Lenore Sr., in her absence, as “more or less the ringleader around here” (36). Rick describes Lenore Sr. brainwashing Lenore Jr. with “words and a book and a belief that the world is words and Lenore’s conviction that her own intimate personal world is only of, neither by nor for, her” (74). LaVache says to Lenore, “It is my clinical opinion that you, in a perfectly natural defensive reaction to your circumstances, have decided you’re not real – of course with Gramma’s help” (249). Lenore Sr. is not defined by her action, but rather fragmented into her effect upon others. The novel presents her solely as a function, a set of ideologies, not in her own particularity or human form. Although all of the characters are located in language by their very nature of being in a book, Lenore Sr. is characterized exclusively by what other people say about her, strengthening reader understanding of her as positioned within language.

Along with being connected to language on various levels, Lenore Sr. is dehumanized in her absence into a function or an idea. In *The One vs. The Many*, Alex Woloch states, “The attempt to circumscribe a character within his or her delimited functionality is always potentially problematic – human beings take up more weight than they fill in this limited role, and it is difficult to separate their exterior function from their interior singularity” (26). Grandma Lenore seems to be the personification of this issue – she is a function-derived character actually obsessed with function. As her son Stonecipher Beadsman explains, “I heard for years and years and suspect you’ve [Lenore] been hearing over and over, yourself, something’s meaning is nothing more or less than its function” (149). To Lenore Sr., human “exterior function” is “interior singularity,” and Foster Wallace grants her this functional role within the novel.

Wallace plays with this idea by dehumanizing and reducing Lenore to a function within the novel – although faceless and invisible, she is in control of the plot. In a largely theatrical and ridiculous moment, it is revealed that that Lenore Sr. has stolen the parrot and the baby food recipe, and has bought out Lenore’s psychologist, Jay, to convince her she is not real so that she can be in complete control of her love and personal life. Jay protests, in an underground tunnel,

“This is eventually going to kill [Lenore Jr.]. You people and I are killing a person from the inside out.

“That’s exactly wrong. It’s we who are keeping her alive...Lenore instructs me to instruct you to simply take care of Mr. Vigorous vis a vis Lenore. He’s getting on everyone’s nerves. Do it. You’ll find some material in here on a person who--” (311)

Suddenly, it is not Lenore Senior’s psychological power over her family and significant presence through invisibility that only reduces her to a function. She *is* the mechanism that is pushing the plot forward, making decisions for the main<sup>2</sup> character. Her abstract power has turned physical, and she is “writing” Lenore Junior’s story for her. At this point in the story, Lenore Jr. breaks up with Mr. Vigorous and turns romantically to Wang Dang Lang, who is the “person” in the preceding paragraph – demonstrating Lenore Senior’s control over her life and the plot itself. David Foster Wallace has taken the power of a minor character, expected within the diegesis, and placed it in a different register. Characters conventionally have power over each other, over the story, through their decisions and actions, but Lenore Sr. has control over other characters, enhancing her influence to an authorial level – readers receive the story *she* wants to tell about Lenore’s life, because she is in control of it.

Lenore Sr. has been granted not the power of a minor character, nor a narrator, who controls the mediation or form, but rather a full-fledged power from behind the scenes, as an author. Foster Wallace calls to attention the power of an author over “their” created characters by assigning one of these creations with the ability to author Lenore Junior’s *reality*, however

fictional it is to readers. On one level, Lenore Senior is a pushy grandmother, plotting to control her granddaughter's life, but to readers, she is an author in controlling the plot.

Despite Lenore Senior's successful control over Lenore Junior within the discourse, her involvement in the authorial register of the novel is revealed, and therefore undermined, by an additional controller – an arranger who provides, organizes, and mediates the various fragments that make up the novel's world. *Broom of the System* divides the duties of an omniscient narrator between Lenore Sr. and the arranger – while Lenore controls characters and plot moves, the arranger mediates, juxtaposes, and reveals events, infusing the narrative with further meaning in a gap somewhere between story and discourse.

In his exploration of narrativization, Hayden White asks,

“What is involved in the production of a discourse in which ‘events seem to tell themselves,’ especially when it is a matter of events that are explicitly identified as “real” rather than “imaginary,” as in the case of historical representations? In a discourse having to do with manifestly imaginary events, which are the ‘contents’ of fictional discourses, the question poses few problems. For why should not the imaginary events be represented as speaking themselves?” (8).

White is referring to the lack of a referential reality within fiction – the diegesis refers only within its own limits, and therefore, there is no question on the events telling themselves. The form is inextricable from the plot, and the telling of the event is the event itself. Of course, this is exactly what Lenore Senior asserts about reality and the very ideas that she has imbued Lenore Jr. with:

“Lenore: Well see, it seems like it's not really like a life that's told, not lived; it's just that the living is the telling, that there's nothing going on with me that isn't either told or tellable, and if so, what's the difference, why live at all?” (119)

However, while *Broom of the System* explores the idea of “life as fiction” with Lenore Senior's control within the discourse, it rejects its validity with its experimental and varying form, mediated by the arranger. Through the arranger, Lenore Senior's control over the diegesis

is undermined. Wallace makes explicit the distinction between characters and humans, between fiction and reality, by revealing Lenore Senior as functioning character, caught up in structure, rather than allowing her to stay behind the scenes as author. In the beginning scene of Lenore Senior's absence, readers are granted an omniscient narrator using second person to simulate for the reader Lenore Junior's point of view, explicitly humanizing Lenore Senior as:

“the person under whose aegis you'd first experienced chocolate, books, swing sets, antinomies, pencil games, contract bridge, the Desert, the person in whose presence you'd first bled into your underwear...the slipping, sick relief, laughter and scolding all at once, Gramma used her left arm and there was old hand in Lenore's newness” (31).

Through this humanizing narration, Lenore Sr. cannot be depicted solely as a function – there again arises tension between “exterior function” and their “interior singularity” that Woloch suggests is implicit in fiction and its relation to the reality outside of it. Although Lenore Senior's exterior literary function is to control the plot, Lenore Junior instills her with a particularity that is intrinsic to humanity and their depiction as fictional characters.

For a large part of the novel, the arranger sticks us inside of the plot through first person accounts, journals, and transcripts from psychological appointments, political meetings, absurd familial history, as well as direct dialogue between characters. As readers, we are along for the ride with the characters – assuming, as most of the characters do, that Lenore Senior holds some sort of psychological control to an unseen and mysterious extent over her granddaughter. It is the arranger, however, who provides readers with the knowledge that Lenore Senior is actually physically controlling the plot from behind the scenes. Like Lenore Junior's humanizing description, this is a moment in which Lenore Senior's transitions, in Woloch's terms, from a role exclusively within the “character space— a particular and charged encounter between actual human and their representation in limited space” into the “character system” or “the arrangement of different character spaces into a unified narrative structure” (14). No longer is



Lenore Sr. the “most real” because of her control, she is now repositioned into the diegesis and the character space, filling her role as a character, albeit a powerful one.

It is also within this moment that the reader experience diverges from the character experience on another level. While Lenore Jr. continues to be utterly controlled by her Grandmother, readers are now aware of Lenore Sr. as a fictive character within a story. No longer is she mediating the relationship between reader and book, but rather is caught up in the diegesis as mediated by the arranger. Within the plot, her great grandmother, on a psychological and personal level within the “character system,” controls Lenore III but also in the “character space” within that character system – Lenore does not have the opportunity to make her own decisions as independent human, because her great grandmother is controlling her life from behind the scenes. There is also a level of authorial control occurring, because the readers’ experience of Lenore III’s life is influenced by her great grandmother, Lenore I becomes an author within the diegesis.

Where Lenore I’s control can be explained as more physical (as physical as a storyworld can be), someone else is dominating on a plane that concerns voice and expression: Rick Vigorous. As Great Grandma Lenore’s control pertains to familial legacy and responsibility, Rick Vigorous’ domination of narration concerns the grappling for control within he and Lenore’s romantic relationship. Within the diegesis, Rick’s literary voice (he owns a publishing company) initially serves to create intimacy between he and Lenore; the stories that he tells her seem to symbolically compensate for his inability to connect with her sexually. Rick comments before that he is physically unable “to be truly inside of and surrounded by Lenore Beadsman,” and after each time they have sex, Lenore says, “A story please,” later she says, “I’m really in the mood for a story” to connect with Rick, inciting sexual language (104,180). Rick sums up his

entire identity as a narrator: “Telling stories that are not my own is at this point what I do, after all. With Lenore I am completely and entirely myself” (74). Rick feels that his authentic self is located in narration, and by “telling,” he connects with Lenore at an honest level.

Initially, Lenore seems to agree, disclosing to Jay, “At least when he tells me stories, it’s up-front and clear what’s story and what isn’t, right? (120). In fact, this characteristic of clarity seems to be exactly what changes as their relationship becomes more tense. As Rick becomes more insecure and dominating, the connective force that narrative carries transforms to manipulation, which Rick barely disguises in the form of a story. In his most desperate moment, Rick projects his distrust of Lenore and self pity into a story about a disloyal wife who cheats on her paralyzed husband, who “really doesn’t and can’t blame his aching lovely wife for what is happening” asking her to:

“imagine his despair...in his numb, helpless black isolation he needs the emotional center of his life, the object of his complete adoration, his fiancée, more than ever; and yet he knows that it is precisely his state of helpless inefficacious isolation – a state that he is in through exactly zero fault of his own – that is of necessity driving the lovely woman he adores farther and farther away” (438).

Instead of trying to genuinely connect, Rick uses language to manipulate Lenore to stay with him, melding a more tragic instance with their own tense interactions, in some way containing Lenore through his projection and narration of her onto a character. Rick states, “Lenore Beadsman arouses in me the purely natural reactive desire to have her inside of and contained by me” (72). It is through language, with which he identifies, that he tries unsuccessfully to do so.

As with Great Grandma Lenore’s psychological and plot-based domination of Lenore’s life, Rick Vigorous’ control is kicked up into a different register, as he becomes one of the main narrators of the *Broom of the System*. Like the tension between the two Lenores, Vigorous’

narration, which eventually stands for control, occurs within and outside of the diegesis. Woloch states that, “narrative progress always entails a series of choices: each choice magnifies or stints others” (12). While this statement refers to the amount of space that characters have within the novel, it also reflects the power of the narrator; “narrative progress” is mediated to us by the narrator, who controls how much we know about each character – it could be said that each narration magnifies or stints another’s narration. Within the diegesis and in its mediation to us, Rick Vigorous stints Lenore’s opportunity to narrate her own life. Foster Wallace depicts Vigorous’ struggle to control Lenore as his struggle to “write” or “narrate” her.

Within the plot itself, readers see Rick constantly telling *about* Lenore – it is from him we learn of her family’s dysfunctional legacy and her position within it as he biographizes her to Andrew Lang while she sleeps. He says, “Lenore hates to be told about,” then narrates her entire life story (262). Of course, this biography is not only being told to Andrew Lang, but also to readers. Rick also slips Lenore his own fictional story about Fieldbender under false pretenses to try to get her real opinion of him. Both of these are very different ways to use narrative to rob Lenore of her voice – to *take* her interior self rather than allow her to *give* it.

As the mediator of the diegesis, Rick Vigorous acts to narrate Lenore’s life in a much more direct way. While the fragments that make up the novel never come from Lenore’s first person point of view, Rick frequently speaks in first person about Lenore. He brings us her physical description: “This is a thin-shouldered, thin-armed, big-breasted girl, a long-legged girl with feet larger than average, feet that tend to point out a bit when she walks...in her black basketball sneakers” (59). This is followed by his admittance that he tried to have sex with her shoe, then romantic depiction of kissing Lenore, then a “montage” of his embarrassment when they met and got involved, followed by another 20 pages of his perception of their interactions.

What is vital is that Lenore's voice is not present in any of this; her description comes to readers exclusively through Rick – like her biography. Wallace is taking Vigorous' narcissistic, obsessive, dominating voice to another level as he becomes the major way we learn anything about our main character.

Lenore's lack of voice is extended into her interactions with her father and brother. Mr. Stonecipher Beadsman is introduced when Lenore goes to visit him – but the interaction is presented as a monologue from her father. Although she seems to be answering, Stonecipher's voice is depicted as a block speech that takes in her replies and continues on its own for eight pages, suggesting the lack of Lenore's power or even her relevance in the conversation. He, too, narrates Lenore's history to us as he prods her on her identity, "Further thoughts on the issue we discussed at length the last time I saw you? No? No further thoughts? Planless, still? Distinguished graduate of Oberlin?" (147). It is from him we learn that Lenore imitates her great grandmother "in all facets" (147). From her brother LaVache we learn how Lenore thinks of herself –

"Shall I recall some of more interesting and to me more than a little disturbing conversations of the last two years? If you don't think of yourself as real..."  
"Who says I don't think of myself as real?" Lenore said...  
"I'd be inclined to say you say so, from your general attitude" (249)

Lenore performs her "unrealness" and it is through LaVache's narration of her that we learn it. Even within omniscient narration, others tell of Lenore – she never tells of herself. Rick Vigorous, as well as Lenore's father and brother, in different ways, take Lenore's voice, whether inside of plot or through the mediation of it. The dominant men in Lenore's life, along with her great grandmother, connect her fictive identity as a character within the "character space" – how we perceive her as real human readers – into the "character system," or how she fits with other characters within the novel. Wallace translates reader awareness of Lenore's unrealness into

characterization of a woman who has a relational, extrinsically defined identity. Perhaps, there is an authorial grappling going on –Wallace manages to dynamically portray Lenore through the lens of masculinity, with which he will always inherently carry. The novel depicts the Lenore’s lack of agency, but also demonstrates Wallace’s desire to acknowledge himself, also, as male author figure in pursuit of dynamically depicting a female life. While Great Grandma Lenore controls the story, and Rick Vigorous the narration, both are undermined by the ample and high view of the arranger, who repositions Lenore I and Rick as characters among other characters, rather than complete plot mechanisms.

The arranger presents the novel’s full depiction of Lenore – Great Grandma Lenore’s influence and Rick Vigorous’ point of view are juxtaposed with omniscience and scenes of exclusively direct dialogue to demonstrate their biases and the limits of their control. The arranger, and therefore the entire novel itself, represents Lenore quite differently. Lenore’s intrinsic experience stays exclusive to her as she acts and performs her life, rather than *telling* it, because telling, to Lenore, “automatically becomes a kind of system, that controls everybody involved” (122).

Lenore utilizes silence and action within the plot to maintain her own power and the fragmented eye of the arranger remains ambiguous about her own power over her identity. Both of these work to ultimately reject the dehumanized, exclusively functional self that much of the novel has tried so hard to assign her. Although Lenore is certainly silenced to a degree by others, it becomes clear that, at times, she deliberately chooses silence and avoids narrativization because she feels that it “robs control” (122). Above, Mr. Stonecipher’s interaction with his daughter can be read as his dominance over their relationship, his narration of her life, with Lenore’s silence signifying her lack of control. However, her silence also can be interpreted as

her power within the system of their relationship. As her father presses her for details about her life, readers are notified of her silence from him: “If you do not say anything, I will automatically assume you have money” and “I see. No real point in discussing it then” (147-8). Although the conversation is depicted as a monologue, this suggests that Lenore is actually resisting explaining her life to her father – she maintains her own silence, rather than having it forced upon her. Again, Wallace emphasizes the power of narration and language in a world completely language-based.

Although Wallace’s characterization of Lenore relies heavily upon others, her voice strengthens through the course of the novel as her connection with her Great Grandmother and Rick Vigorous weaken. Initially, Lenore is characterized largely by Vigorous’ first person voice, but the arranger also provides readers with scenes of direct dialogue and omniscient narration, increasingly so as the novel moves forward.

Aside from Vigorous’ extensive romantic monologues on Lenore, readers are also privy to their relationship through scenes of exclusively direct dialogue presented by the arranger. While first person narration from Vigorous calls readers to empathize and identify with him, the dialogue reveals his disturbing level of pushiness and smothering of Lenore fueled by insecurity. When Great Grandmother Lenore goes missing, Rick is horrified that Lenore won’t tell him what is going on. Their reactions to the situation are completely different. While Lenore tries to think, Rick won’t shut up, pushing: “I insist that you tell me... The thought of things about you, troubling you, that I don’t know about, makes blood run from my eyes, on the inside” (84). Wallace again demonstrates the importance of narration in identity – Vigorous attempts to control Lenore by extracting her own infinite interior narrative and placing it outside of her to

control her in some way. While he is agitated that Lenore is upset, he specifies that is the things that he doesn't "know about" that make him the most upset.

Lenore's handling of the story about her Grandmother is equally telling; she is cautious and considers the consequences of her narration: She asks, "Could you possibly just wait, for about nine-tenths of a second, while I decide *how* to tell you?" and follows, "It's just that the thing I have to tell is, *a*, unbelievably weird, and I don't even really understand it" (84).

It is perfectly fitting that Wallace depicts Lenore emphasizing the idea that narration renders reality malleable by providing readers with unmitigated direct dialogue. While Rick's first person narration highlights the immense gap between individual realities, scenes of direct dialogue remain unmediated – they are honest and whole in a way that the novel stresses no narration can be. Lenore is as cautious about her utilization of narrative as Rick is desperately controlling with it. She protects her experience of that day just as she protected her own life narrative from her father, resisting contextualization of the facts about her, not desiring to be placed into a system by anyone. As she tells Rick when he obsessively asks about Norman Bombardini, "I'm your friend. Your girlfriend. I'm not your business" (197). Lenore rejects narrativization because it reduces her to a function or an object.

Direct dialogue allows Lenore's unmediated expression, and requires no narrativization. This tone is echoed also within the omniscient narration of the novel, which is transparent and casual. The omniscient narrator repeatedly opens description with "What's going on is...", casually introducing the narrative as if it were a readers' own very apparent surroundings (4, 10). The narration creates an affinity between it and the readers, stating, "Clarice stops, Biff pounds the door with the back of his head again, *emphasizing the general state of affairs* (18, emphasis added). It as if reader and narrator realize the ridiculous situation the characters have gotten

themselves into, and is establishing a knowing connection with readers about the plot. However wise the narrator may seem, the transparency with which they depict the diegesis comes off as honesty and a lack of bias, especially after experience with the plotting Great Grandmother and voice of dominating, desperate Rick. It is natural to relate the direct eye of the narrator with the far-reaching arranger, because both bring a much clearer, fragmented point of view.

Early in the novel, there are two important occasions when the omniscient narrator turns their view toward adult Lenore, and although the narration is not focalized through her, there arises a feeling of empathy from the narrator towards Lenore. It is as though the omniscience understands she does not want to be narrated, to be placed “within a system” (122). The first is when Lenore learns of her Great Grandmother’s disappearance, and in the moment that Bloemker tells her that Lenore I is missing, the narrator turns the eye of examination back onto the reader, avoiding a portrayal of Lenore in an intimate moment:

“Well, now, just imagine how you’d feel if you great-grandmother...were all the sudden missing, altogether, and was for all you knew lying flat as a wet Saltine on some highway with a tire track in her forehead and her walker now a sort of large trivet, and you’ll have an idea of how Lenore Beadsman felt when she was informed that her great-grandmother was missing” (31).

As Patrick O’Donnell states, it’s as if the language and the narrator “could not ‘imagine’ on its own the affect it names” (18). Even more so, it’s as though the narrator knows that Lenore would not prefer for it to be rendered into language. And again, when the narrator displaces attention from Lenore’s life narrative onto the physical surroundings of her room: “Lenore Beadsman was in possession of the following items...” followed much later by dialogue from Lenore expressing how some of these items were not hers, such Mrs. Yingst’s walker (98). This is a joint effort of the narrator and the arranger to depict, in a fragmented manner, the plot of Lenore Beadsman’s life, without pressing or molding the narrative. Instead of taking her voice,



telling her story, it is a description of objects followed by Lenore's own blurted-out awareness of the strange occurrence. The honest, casual tone of the omniscient narrator and the fragmented and far-reaching depiction of the diegesis presented by the arranger seem to empathize and connect with Lenore's desire to express herself and respond to her rejection of placement in a system. Finally, on a much larger scale, the narrative seems to be controlled in some way by our main character, allowing for humanization rather than functionality.

The connection established between the arranger and Lenore, which allows for her to remain independent of control, strengthens as the novel moves forward and her relationships with Great Grandma Lenore and Rick Vigorous weaken. As Lenore's dysfunctional relationship dies away and her Great Grandmother remains missing, her power within the plot, and her voice within the mediation strengthens. As Rick asks about his Fieldbender story, Lenore verbalizes the power she is gaining over narrative, asserting, "A story can't make you pale, or sick, Rick" (336). This sets the precedence for the rest of the Lenore's experience – she seems to be freed from the power that narrative once had over her. Her interactive relationship with Andrew Lang contrasts with the Rick's insecure monologues that stood in for true intimacy. The first occasion that they spend time together, they are both sexually and verbally intimate, and when Lenore starts to get sad about Lang's life, he says: "That's my sad, not your sad" (418). This utterance emphasizes Lang's secure idea of them as two people in exchange, not as the merging of one, as Rick has pushed for with Lenore.

The omniscient narration of Lenore and Andrew's interaction also seems to be specifically rejecting the assignation of function to Andrew Lang's character. The narration depicts Lenore: "She felt like she could see Lang from all different angles all of the sudden...he was all over, it seemed" and later, "The wine in the glass sloshed; Lang was broken into pieces

that didn't fit" (398, 403). It is relevant that the narration starts out as focalized through Lenore, then transforms into free indirect discourse later – we know that Lenore is thinking of Lang this way, but it is depicted as a general observation by the narrator. Not only are readers finally gaining access to Lenore's interior in a naturalized, unforced manner, but the narration also shows that Lang is unable to be placed into the system – he is everywhere, his pieces that don't fit make him irreducible into a function. His ambiguous complexity humanizes him. Lang also insists that Lenore had better "call him Andy...you shouldn't call me anything but Andy, I don't think" (404). Lang's rejection of his sexually charged nickname, "Wang Dang Lang," asserts his desire to no longer be denoted as a phallus. After this initial experience, there is an entire page, with its own heading, devoted to this short paragraph:

"The time last night when Lenore Beadsman cried in front of Andrew Sealander Lang was the first time she had ever cried in front of anybody else, at all. Rick Vigorous has cried in front of lots of people" (443).

The extremely private nature of the narration itself makes it clear that this is, again, Lenore's interior expression finally coming through to the narrative, unmediated by another character. The new priority set upon omniscient rather than first person narration also exemplifies the affinity between her and the arranger, who emphasizes the importance of the occurrence by setting it apart from the rest of the narrative as its own distinct piece. This striking fragment is, however, the last time that readers are granted Lenore's interior thoughts. While the narration and arrangement of the novel gradually grows more and more harmonized with Lenore as she seems to obtain power in her own life, Foster Wallace creates an ambiguous conclusion that ultimately complicates and humanizes Lenore even further.

In short, Lenore and Andrew Lang escape further narration – even as all of the characters gather in the lobby of the Bombardini building for the satisfying finale, and it becomes clear that

Great Grandma Lenore has been living in the phone lines, Lenore and Lang maintain their own private narrative, Lenore's simple, resounding, "Hey." that transforms the conclusion into a new introduction, to a fresh narrative that will remain unwritten, and therefore uncontrolled, rejecting systemization (457). This utterance could stand as an appropriate, striking ending, granting Lenore the last word, but Foster Wallace continues even further to demonstrate the novel's rejection of dehumanized, functional characters within a system they cannot control.

The end of the book cuts to a desperate scene between Mindy and Rick, as Mindy presses Rick to explain what happened and is happening to Lenore. Within the plot, this information would allow Mindy access to Lenore and Lang as she pursues control over her alienated husband. Rick fails to narrate Lenore and Lang and the significance jumps up another register as he states, "You can trust me...I'm a man of my" concluding the novel with a half statement, jerking readers back into reality, which is not made of words (467). While on a simple level, Rick is unable to gain the pair access back into Lenore's life, therefore failing what he has invested all of his belief and self into: words and narration. He also highlights Lenore's escape from narration as readers are denied final access into her life, deprived of a satisfying conclusion to her story, as she is ultimately granted freedom from the "telling" of her life. Rick's last, cut utterance also simulates the difference between fiction and reality and the place where rhetoric loses its power as readers are jolted from the novel back into their surrounding reality, ultimately also asserting the power of the novel over reader attention.

Of course, there is also the underlying issue that Great Grandmother Lenore had intended for Lenore III to be with Andrew "Wang Dang" Lang, and for her relationship with Rick to end. The novel, however, capitalizes on this ambiguity. Readers come away unsure whether Lenore has escaped or maintains caught up in her Great Grandmother's mysterious scheme (to live

through Lenore forever or something?). In “Language, Gender, and Modes of Power,” Clare Hayes-Brady’s describes: “Lenore does not tell, she is told. So although her journey is the central one of the story, she remains wholly out of reach to the reader, acted upon rather than active, always and only alien” (135). I disagree with this reading -- Foster Wallace has ultimately taken a character who fears she is unreal and complicated, deepened, and humanized her by first depicting those who “tell” for her, and then finally, allowing her to “tell” with her ultimate escape from the reach of language. The haziness that surrounds her character and the various interpretations that can be applied to her life are so very real, that in some way, Lenore remains victor over the reducing aspects of functionality.

Wallace’s multi-layered depiction of feminine agency touches upon the charged nature of male narration of female stories. It is as though he decides to perform the disconnection in male-female relations as the male author of female main character’s narrative, maintaining his own, proper identity while managing to capture something very relevant in gendered interaction. *Broom of the System* demonstrates the overlap of narrative and reality, the connection between agency and telling, the bias inherent in any narrative, and seems to assert the importance, but also the difficulty, of humanization of characters, all through the elusive Lenore Beadsman III.

Wallace decides to maintain both the functional and humanist side of Lenore, to leave her fate ambiguous, and to assign power to Great Grandma Lenore, Rick Vigorous, an omniscient narrator, and the arranger, creating a challenging and complex “theoretical fiction” which Mark Currie explains, “is a performative rather than a constative narratology, meaning it does not try to state the truth about an object-narrative but rather enacts or performs what it wishes to say about narrative while itself being a narrative” (52). Both Wallace’s consideration of language within an object that is completely dependent upon language and to free a character from her diegetic issues with telling being “robbing control” by very simply freeing her from the text itself are sorts of performances that denote the place of fiction

within reality. *Broom of the System* is not directly metafictional (though Rick can easily be compared to our author), but Wallace's depiction of Lenore demonstrates an awareness of his own self, of authorial power over character voice, specifically a male author speaking for a female. These issues of gendered voice comes into question even more in *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men* in the character of the interviewer and the hideous men.

## Section 2: On A Generally Hideous Human Population

*Brief Interviews with Hideous Men* is a veritable smorgasbord of characters and narrators, containing extensive variation in tone and form; 23 separate mininarratives which gain significance through juxtaposition and relation of their position to one another chronologically and also through their assigned titular relation (there are three selections called “Yet Another Example of the Porousness of Certain Borders,” yet their included numbering goes up to 24, two “The Devil is a Busy Man,” two “Adult World” sections, and of course, four sections bringing us “Brief Interviews with Hideous Men”). The gesture of the title’s collection pushes reader attention forth to the interviews, which contain the straightforward and repeated interaction of a nameless, voiceless, invisible female narrator and the hideous men, who, as Mary K. Holland puts it, “shock and disgust us with admissions of bad behavior, then add offense by demanding our identification and understanding” (107).

Just as the pronounced lack of Lenore’s voice in *Broom of the System* can be read simply as Wallace’s inability to properly develop female characters, so too can the interviews be understood as they appear; a representation of the overwhelmingly strong male voice in the canon and society as a whole, with the invisible, voiceless female as victim of sexual objectification. While this straightforward reading of Wallace can be considered valid and helpful in our understanding of the world, albeit a little obvious, its straightforwardness recognizes but does not attempt to upend the inequalities it acknowledges. I would suggest, rather, that in a closer reading of the interviews, as well as considering them alongside the other short stories in the collection, there is an inversion of this original simple argument. The concept of “telling as robbing control” is overturned as the extensive self-telling of the hideous men robs them of their power as characters, while the interviewer gains power through her lack of telling. The silent interviewer gains her voice and power through her immense effect upon her subjects, as well as her power as the arranger of her own section. She is more varied, diverse, and widely representative of females than

the men she interviews, who are depicted through repetition as depersonalized and exclusively functional, making them largely insignificant. The interviews' relationship with the other stories and collection as a whole also works to equalize gender relations and present a wider ranging perspective that remarks on the issues of humanity as a whole rather than emphasizing differentiation between gender.

The interviewer in *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men* is much like the character of Lenore in *Broom of the System*. Although there are strong male voices that dominate both of their narratives, these male voices are undermined in through choices in the discourse, rather than story. While Wallace uses Lenore's ambiguous end to allow her escape from dominating forces and the trappings of language as a whole, the narrator's identity is widened and deepened through both the displacement of her voice onto the interviewees, as well as her power of arranger of her own sections. The displacement of her voice through these tactics allows her to maintain her silence and connects her own experience with the reader, while also dodging the decision in labeling or assigning a generalized voice to women as a whole. So, while initially the interviews depict a weak, voiceless female drowned out strong, present male counterparts, Wallace consequently upends these very characterizations.

One of these initial impressions is the idea that readers know very little about the interviewer, or that through her silence, she is depersonalized. However, while each interviewee is presented only once and through a brief self-narrative, we can assume our interviewer remains the same throughout the experience by the standardized layout of each interview, which is headed by: B.I. #\_\_, Month-Year, Location. The interviewer's role as arranger of the "Brief Interviews with Hideous Men" sections of the book provides readers with information about her and allows her an indirect voice in the narrative. Most of the pieces provided in the interviews sections are actually interviews, maintaining the identity of our interviewer as more professional and generic, but there is also one overheard conversation and two breakups which the interviewer mediates to readers. The overheard conversation is placed early on in the timeline as B.I. #3 11-94 Trenton NJ [Overheard], and reveals a personal interest, perhaps the early origins of the interviewers' research. It also incites the image of the interviewer not as solely an

interviewer, but a person on a bus or in a restaurant, pulling at her identity as the simple “Q.” she is signified with.

The breakups push at the interviewer’s identity as exclusively “interviewer” much further. The first breakup, as it comes in the chronology, is labeled B.I. #11 06-96 Vienna VA and is a man ending his relationship with Q., blaming it all on her while generating sympathy for himself. The hideousness of the man peaks when he says, “I swear if you could see your own face right now anybody’d understand why I’m leaving” and closes with “Me leaving is *not* the confirmation of your fears about me. It is not. It’s *because* of them. Okay?” (21). The interviewee is unable to take ownership for any of his own emotions or decisions. The next breakup within the chronology of the stories, B.I. #2 10-94 Capitola CA, maintains the same roles between the male and female, with the projection, blaming, and inability to take ownership or validate the interviewer’s feelings in any way. The male very well may actually be the same one from interview #11 (who mentions the history between them), but what is more striking is the unmediated direct dialogue readers are receiving from the interviewer’s most personal life situations. Suddenly, the personal motivation behind the interviews becomes apparent and the interviewer is humanized as a chronology begins to emerge – we indirectly learn that she went through a terrible breakup with a selfish man and a year later she began taking notes on conversations between men, then moved onto formal interviews.

While our information about the interviewer becomes more specific, we can see the first glimpses of the men defined only by their narcissism between #2 and #11 – there is a chance that they are actually the same person, but it really doesn’t matter much. The interviews were explicitly chosen, like the overhead conversation (out of thousands of overheard conversations), to depict a certain interchangeable quality among men, not the men themselves – which actually places the ultimate power in the interviewer’s hands, through her ability to arrange and abstract them. In this way, the structure that initially seems to depict the weak voice of the female and the overwhelming character of the males begins to act in reverse.



Of course, the identity and voice of the interviewer are also displaced into the dialogue of the interviewees, emphasizing her strong effect on them while also negatively framing their perceptions.

Frequently, the men turn their frustration towards the interviewer:

“Have you been paying the slightest attention, *slouched over there?* (114, emphasis added);  
“I’m not saying nothing bad ever happened to you, you’re not bad-looking and I bet there’s been some degradation or whatever that came your way in life...And baby, I can tell just from just looking at you you never. You wouldn’t even wear what you’re wearing” (119);  
“I know I’m not telling you anything you haven’t already decided you know. With your slim chilly smile...you shorthaired catamenial bra-burner” (304)  
“Ask me now. Say it. I stand here naked before you. Judge me, *you chilly cunt. You dyke, you bitch, cooze, cunt, slut, gash.* Happy now? (318, emphasis added).

All of these situations both depict the power of the narrator over her interviewees while also allowing them to negatively frame themselves, while the reader is aligned with the interviewer through a mutual observational, silent viewpoint. The interviewer, through her silence, allows space for connections between her and the reader to grow. While readers can cultivate their own ideas about the interviewer, the strength of the men’s mutual hideousness is thrown in the readers’ faces. The narrator’s silence is multifunctional – while it serves to create an affinity between she and the reader, it also portrays disbelief, disgust, and deliberate speechlessness at deafening levels in response to the male assertions.

One of the most prominent of these instances is when a man admits that the main reason he stays with his girlfriend is because she doesn’t look bad after having his child, and he still wants to have sex with her. He asks the interviewer:

“Does that sound shallow? Tell me what you think. Or does the real truth about this kind of thing always sound shallow, you know, everybody’s real reasons? What do you think? How does it sound?” (27)

Aside from the readers’ impulse to scream, “It sounds absolutely terrible!” (again aligning them with the interviewer), the regular silence suddenly seems to signify far more than it ever has. It denotes the unanswerability of his question, and really how it is not a question at all, but rather a plea to place his own narrative in context with others like him, which is actually exactly what the collection is doing as a whole. Although this hideous man fits right in with the others and his personality fails to surprise, his question in itself emphasizes one of the main problems that Wallace seems to be trying to highlight in the

collection – the location of value as external through comparison and reactions from others, rather than originating somewhere inside of a person. We will see more of this issue with his maid in “A Supposedly Fun Thing I’ll Never Do Again,” when he asks, “I mean, if pampering and radical kindness don’t seem motivated by strong affection and thus don’t somehow affirm one or help assure one that one is not, finally, a dork of what final and significant value [is it]? (299). Wallace is critiquing the creation of feelings through relational identity rather than the generation of one’s own self – an issue that *Broom* criticizes Rick Vigorous for in his relationship with Lenore, and what Lenore always fears is happening to her. The interviewee places the judgment of his assertions into the hands of the other, allowing them to ultimately generate the value of his life. While the identity of the interviewer builds as both particular and relatable in her unique mediation, the interviewees’ commonalities reduce them to a functional representation of narcissism and insecurity, rather than interesting or empathetic representations of real humans.

Close reading of the sections entitled “Brief Interviews with Hideous Men” upends the initial presentation of strong male voice drowning out silent female victim. The male voices are reduced to their hideous qualities from the very onset of title page, and as readers, we feel a stronger sense of disconnected disgust with them through every nuanced version of the same story. Within Woloch’s “character system,” within the diegesis, the characterization of the interviewer is displaced, mediating her qualities and depicting her narrative while emphasizing the contrast between her and the aggressive interviewees. Within the “character space,” the encounter between reality and fiction, the narrator gains reader interest and is aligned with them through their common observational viewpoint, made specifically unique by each framing that specific readers bring to the text. Wallace’s use of displacement also allows for him to temporarily dodge the consequences of his inherent voice of male authorship, as he fails to assign a voice, or in Lenore’s words “rob control,” of the interviewer by assigning characteristics and narrating her himself. Wallace’s avoidance of narrating the interviewer allows for him to emphasize the difference between him and the interviewees, who are regularly “telling of” the women in their lives.

While the “Brief Interviews with Hideous Men” sections of the book ultimately encourage reader connection with the silent interviewer and immense disinterest in the strong, vocal males, its placement within the collection of *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men* as a whole complicate these impressions. Wallace presents many different types of men that resist the label of hideousness and imbue human and particular qualities of masculinity. The narrative of the collection as a whole also becomes less fragmented as we reach the final selections, which connect and explain the concept of hideousness. While the arranger in *Broom* works to liberate Lenore, the issues of feminine voice that the interviewer presents ultimately rest on the back burner by the arranger of the short story collection, who ultimately unites the fragments to represent some larger quality of human isolation, rather than focusing on the differentiation of gender.

There is one male within the selections of the interviews who transcends the reduction into functionality and calls specifically for empathy. The man in B.I. #46 07-97 Nutley NJ, who initially expresses his frustration with “the knee-jerk attitude about violence and degradation in the case of women...where it adds up to this very limited condescending thing of saying they’re fragile of breakable things and can be destroyed so easily” (116). This impression of another blameless, hideous man grappling to place his misogynist views as externally created is complicated as Wallace’s form eventually reveals, through specific and excruciating detail, that the man himself has likely been brutally gang-raped and regains his power in his environment through understanding it as a trial that has had a positive impact on his understanding of life. His extensive feminization of his own experience is followed by a moment in which he reveals details that place him in the scene is our first glimpse of a cry for empathy; an effort on the part of the collection to genuinely depict the sorrow and insecurity in which this hideousness originates.

From the deigesis in the interviews, we can zoom out to the collection as a whole which is mediated by an even more invisible arranger than the interviewer. The selection “Think,” also captures an aspect of masculinity that diverges from the characterization of hideous men in the interviews section.

The short story captures the intensity of a few minutes in which a man decides whether or not cheat on his wife with her younger sister. Primarily, the story is focalized through a male who actually, like the title suggests, thinks about and takes ownership over his own choices. Thrown in with the depiction of their sexual interaction are the inevitable images of the consequences: “Her breasts have come free. He imagines his wife and son,” and “In his imagination’s tableau his wife’s hand on his small son’s shoulder in an almost fatherly way” (72-3). His point of view seems to represent the opposite of female objectification, from his emotional processing of his family and his preoccupation with the woman’s desire to depict herself as an sexual object, rather than her own internal sexual mood: “The sister with the breasts by the bed has a level gaze and a slight smile, slight and smoky, *media taught*,” “Her expression is from Page 18 of the Victoria’s Secret catalogue,” “he realizes she’s replaying a scene from some movie he loves” and finally:

“Her expression is a combination of seductive and aroused, with an overlay of slight amusement meant to convey sophistication, the loss of illusions long ago. It’s the sort of expression that looks devastating in a photograph but becomes awkward when it’s maintained over time” (73).

The girl endeavors to make an intense sexual impression, but the man’s focus emphasizes how her depiction simply matches her external environment and does not originate from anywhere within. Even as he experiences it, he is imagining it as rewritten to embody the fantasy of narratives external to himself – the initial “her breasts are unconfined now” is re-rendered as “her hand moved to her bra and *freed* her breasts” (72). The conclusion of the brief story aligns the woman’s awareness of the gap between the depiction of fantasy and reality, which the man has been maintaining all along: “Her awareness of her own nudity becomes a different kind of awareness. She’s not sure how to stand or look when he’s gazing so intently upward...She’s now aware of just how she’s standing, how silly it might look through a window” (73-4). The depiction of the influence of the media is melded with the woman’s inability to express her identity without the expectations of the male gaze, because the identity she is projecting does not originate from within, but rather is projection of those expectations.

“Think” provides us both with a very different depiction of masculinity than the singular hideousness of the interviews -- a man that experiences and processes the gap inherent in male perception and female interior, rather than one who tries to assume, tell, and simplify it, to speak for, to speak **over** women, as exemplified in two of the interviewees self-referential dialogue: “Or to put another way, what do today’s women *think* they want versus what do they deep down really *want*.” (226) “Think” concludes with, “And what if she joined him on the floor, just like this, clasped in supplication: just this way” (74). The story ultimately depicts not a sexual intimacy but the desire for a more earnest connection, phrased as an unsettling conditional assertion outward, rather than interactional dialogue -- suggesting its unlikelihood and maintaining their disconnection.

While many of the other stories depict men who resist the label of hideousness, the overwhelming attention of the collection is geared more towards the disconnection that the last statement in “Think” achieves – the sense of a lonely desire for intimate emotional interaction made even more striking through the lack of alleviation of this loneliness and the distortion of this loneliness into narcissism and miogyny. The collection opens with “A Radically Condensed History of Postindustrial Life,” setting the tone. It is a short story in five sentences, with three characters: she, he, and “the man who introduced them.” All three of the characters are aligned in their mutual desire to be liked, but feel no emotions toward the others. The story ends with the cyclical, unsettling “One never knew, after all, now did one now did one now did one,” leaving the reader with a completely unsatisfied feeling (0).

The briefness of the story leaves blank space all over the page, echoing the emptiness of emotion in the content. The page is numbered zero, which is unusual in a novel, and incites the idea of “Postindustrial Life” as ground zero – the book starts at an emotional ground zero. The barrenness of the content is carried through depersonalized characters, but in Woloch’s terms, they seem not be flat characters, with “disassociation of the infinite interior from the capturable exterior,” but rather the deliberate lack of character development reflects their lack of interior emotional development. This stands in contrast with the interviewer, whose silence simply acts as an initial shroud to her more complicated

character development. Integrally, the short story that opens the collection aligns the male and the female in their respective isolation, rather than differentiating them or introducing power dynamics:

“When they were introduced, he made a witticism, hoping to be liked. She laughed extremely hard, hoping to be liked. Then each drove home alone, staring straight ahead, with the very same twist to their faces”

In considering first the “Brief Interviews” selections and their contrast and role in the book as a greater whole, we can, as with *Broom of the System*, see the immense power of the overall arranger. The book continues on with separate, fragmented narratives, many which emphasize the disconnection between people and the narcissism inherent in relationships, as well as the lack of genuine interaction – reinforcing the issues present in “Brief Interviews.” However, while “Adult World,” and “Tri-Stan: I Sold Sisse Nar to Ecko” emphasize other nuanced approaches to gender relations which put them in direct dialogue with the interviews sections, there are also many stories which represent these issues without an explicit consideration of gender, such as “The Depressed Person,” a tedious simulation of the experience of being so narcissistic and disengaged from intimacy. As with “Think,” the arranger also provides us with more balanced characterizations, in which readers are privy to both interior and exterior elements. The gap between the genre of interviews (fragments which highlight a theme that devalues the strong male voice into a function and emphasizes the power of silence and arrangement) and the genre of artfully constructed stories (which have more forward-looking narrative energy) is inherent in the differences of their tactics and impressions. While the interview sections align with Lenore’s issue of voice, they ultimately lack the harmonized power of the novel which allows Lenore to be set free from these issues. Rather, the interviewer and her issues of female voice are ultimately subjugated to the rehumanization of the hideous men.

In the three consecutive last selections before the closing story, Wallace unites these themes of gender and the issues of general disconnection, pushing towards a more unified story collection and diverting from a path of fragmentation, ultimately creating a collection that concludes with a call for empathy and understanding towards narcissism and hideousness. The characters in “On His Deathbed,

Holding Your Hand, the Acclaimed New Young Off-Broadway Playwright's Father Begs a Boon," "Suicide as Sort of a Present," and the last selection of "Brief Interviews with Hideous Men," although not explicitly or objectively connected, hold a related power over one another that allows Wallace to artfully infuse significance into the disconnection and loneliness that fills the collection, calling for greater empathy and understanding of narcissism and insecurity, and again ultimately critiquing humanity's externally placed value system rather than a trust of their own internal selves. In this connection, Wallace bonds the interview fragments with the short story fragments formally, but also gestures towards comprising the gap between the extreme emphasis of male narcissism and the more rounded characters by providing motivation for the hideousness.

"On His Deathbed" carries the voice of a dying father describing his immediate hate for his son. The father believes he is giving his last confession to a priest and this illusion is maintained for the readers, until the very end when it is revealed he has been talking to his son the whole time. While the story on its own gives a reinforced sense of terrible loneliness, the seeds of connection are planted in the father's narrative. He emphasizes the disconnection that grew between him and his wife as he never discloses his hate for his own child, who he finds to be essentially evil: "The chasm's essence was that she believed there was no chasm" (270). His description of his wife's utter devotion to their child and the chasm between the characters is echoed in "Suicide as a Sort of Present."

It opens with, "There was once a mother who had a very hard time indeed, emotionally, inside" (283). The woman is characterized as a mother, a "mother-to-be" and "mother-in-waiting" before she ever even has a child, to depict her lack of internal identity. While her interior is filled with self-loathing, the mother sets high standards of herself to obtain approval from the outside world. When the mother has her child, she has such high expectations for it that "her natural inclination was to loathe it" whenever it failed because she began to place her identity on the child: "The child appeared in a sense to be the mother's own reflection in a diminishing and deeply flawed mirror (285). However, as Wallace states, "No *good* mother can loathe her child or judge it or abuse it or wish it harm in any way," emphasizing the societal

assigned value of the word good – of course, the mother is already a bad mother, but as long as she appears to be a good one, then she is (285, emphasis added).

Ultimately, the mother shows nothing but completely unconditional love for her son, even as he begins to belie qualities of a very dangerous young man. He “lied and cheated and terrorized the neighborhood pets,” “stole his UNICEF money...swung a cat by its tail and struck it repeatedly against the sharp corner of the brick home next door” (286). Her love fosters a disconnection between the young boy and the external world: “she seem[ed] to the child to be his lone refuge in a world of impossible expectations and merciless judgment and unending psychic shit” (286). The piece ends, unsettlingly, with the statement that since the mother could not express any of her loathing, the child expressed it all for her.

Between the two stories, we can see an obvious connection: the father in the first story sees his son as evil while the mother devotes herself wholly to him – the son in the second story is actually evil due to his mother’s loathing masked in devotion. Although the characters in the two stories are not the same, their shared experience of detachment and secrecy is. The second story calls into question the father’s point of view in the first: is it possible that his wife had the interior feelings of the “mother-to-be,” that as she “ceased to know” him, he ceased to know her as well? Within these two stories, Wallace lays out “psychic shit” and disconnection as a familial and humanist affair. The secrecy contains the internal infinity of all of these characters, as well, interacts with the extremely minor and depersonalized characters in “A Radically Condensed History of Postindustrial Life.” In the opening story, Wallace utilizes the extreme depersonalization of these characters to depict their emptiness, while these closing connections suggests that a contained infinite interior is a coping mechanism for self and other loathing.

Of course, these last stories and their exploration of emotional issues also contrast with the previous interview selections, but connect with the final interview. The boy in “Suicide as a Sort of Present” began to show notorious signs of a future serial killer, and the closing sentence acts as a sort of promise that he would express all of his mother’s loathing for her. The last story, framed by a hideous



man in an interview, tells an account of a girl who escapes a serial killer by showing him sincere connection and unconditional love. The interviewee says of the serial killer,

“The psychotic sex killer is thus quite often symbolically killing the mother, whom he hates and fears but of course cannot literally kill because he is still enmeshed in the infantile belief that without her love he will somehow die” (305).

This is a distinct connection between this serial killer and the boy, or the type of boy, in the previous story and his relationship with his mother. Just as the mother shrouds her loathing for the boy in unconditional love, the boy cannot kill his mother despite his awareness of her loathing because her love is what creates his escape from the rest of the world. So instead, he must turn this hatred outward. Of course, this idea applies more generally to women throughout the entire book, as we see the men lashing out at the interviewer due to their tense relations with women in general, or lashing out on women due to their tense relations with one personal woman. The last interview makes this connection explicit through (what else?) the interviewee’s voice:

“And that all too obvious part of the reason for his cold and mercenary and maybe somewhat victimized behavior is that the potential profundity of the very connection he has worked so hard to make her feel terrifies him...I’m inviting you to consider that it isn’t the *motivation* that’s the psychotic part. The permutation is simply the psychotic one of substituting rape, murder, and mind-shattering terror for exquisite love-making and giving a false number whose falseness isn’t so immediately evident” (304).

The last actions described are his own. The interviewee himself aligns the hideous men with the serial killer in their motivation to spurn intimacy with women, the motivation of fear. In these last three selections, Wallace connects the interviews with the stories, creating fluidity rather than fragmentation, or at least providing harmony and connection as a conclusion. The interviewee’s assertions seem more plausible to readers because of the recent experience of the previous two stories, which are structured more as a call for empathy rather than a denotation of the functionality and hideousness of men in the interviews. The three selections work together to create more significance for the collection as a whole, aiding readers to consider both the expression of narcissism and its origins in insecurity, loss, and sorrow.

The collection of *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men* goes works forward with contrasting fragments that share the theme of narcissism and disconnection. The voice of the hideous man is

undermined by its repetitiveness and reduced to solely a function in the interview selections, and paradoxically placed alongside stories which contain males who are more fully developed, while also echoed by other selections which reinforce their narcissistic voices without the consideration of gender, generalizing disconnection as a human affair. The arranger of the collection acts to eliminate the gap between the two genres, aligning the characters in the selections even more closely and providing origin to the narcissistic tendencies present throughout the collection. The arranger also acts to create union and wholeness out of fragmentation, repairing in form what is maintained in human relations. Through *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men*, Wallace asserts the condition of isolation first through fragmentation, then with connection in form.

While the arranger harmonizes the collection as a whole, the female voice of the interviewer, which is pronounced in her own selections, is drowned out by the sounds of the general human condition. While the displacement of her characteristics in her own sections can be likened greatly to *Broom of the System*, the interaction between the interviewer and the overall arranger in *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men* differs greatly. As *Broom of the System* moves forward, Lenore's connection with the arranger grows and strengthens the complexity of her depiction, while the interviewer largely fades in to the background with the last interview. Although the interviewee is in direct dialogue with her in his last assertion, I would agree with Hayes-Brady's reading of the section as a "double-silencing" of the "Granola-Cruncher" and "Q., the interviewer" (143). This "double-silencing" seems to be caused largely by our reader attention to the hideous man and his attempts to both be genuine and in defense of his earnestness, acting out the "motivation of terror" as he explains it – paralleling the book's ability to express emotional disjunction through connection in the discourse. Ultimately, the arranger's connection between the three stories pulls the collection's attention away from the characterization of the female, subjugating her position and bringing to the forefront the explanation of the hideousness of the men.

While *Broom of the System* and *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men* consider the power dynamic inherent in narration, they differ greatly in ultimate ends of the power distribution. While the

characterization of Lenore ultimately is deepened and liberated by the arranger, the interviewee's own sections (in which she is the arranger) provide her with more power independently of the other stories, and are subjugated in the final assertions of the collection. Overall, readers can see Wallace's fiction as considering the issue of power between arranger, narrator, and characters. While *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men* ultimately calls attention to the human condition rather than a specifically gendered experience, it still works to make evident issues of the power of authorship and point of view by its consistent fragmentation and variance in narrators. For these reasons, it can be likened to *Broom of the System* in its exploration and confrontation with literary techniques. This stands in direct contrast to the pieces in the next section, Wallace's nonfiction essays, which emphasize the isolated individual experience through first person point of view in a much more naturalized human narrative experience.

### **Section 3: On Being Entertained by Someone Who Clearly Dislikes You and Feeling that You Deserve the Dislike at the Same Time You Resent It**

While all of these intricacies laid out in the former section make Wallace's fiction an extremely rewarding experience, his first person point of view non-fiction essays have been largely preferred by the general public (Max 228). It is likely that this is because while these pieces maintain Wallace's unique tone and insights, they do not simulate or extensively complicate the experience or mediation of their content, rather focus on the content itself. The collection of essays *A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again*<sup>3</sup>, are called essays because they are constative – they specifically argue and declare – they tell, rather than show. In many ways, some pieces of Wallace's nonfiction seems to utilize what *Broom of the System* and *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men* make transparent – the immense power of the narrator, the apparent malleability of the diegesis, as well as the unacknowledged depersonalization of characters that function specifically in relation to an argument.

*A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again* is a collection of seven essays – two of which, “E Unibus Pluram” and “Greatly Exaggerated,” stand as evidence of Wallace as a literary critic (despite his dislike of them), in which his voice is chiefly professional and disassociated from his personal life. Two others, “Tennis Player Michael Joyce” and “David Lynch Keeps his Head” are informative pieces exploring Wallace's interests. Each of these essays is a little biographical (“David Lynch” moreso than the others), but this seems more an issue of tone; the pieces are very informative and include more analysis than self-reflective or biographical information. Essays one, three, and seven differ greatly from two, four, five, and six. The collection opens with biographical “Derivative Sport in Tornado Alley:” a slow, comfortable depiction of Wallace's background in mathematics and how this aided his skills in tennis more than anything else. Presented in first person point of view, Wallace as narrator is basically the singular character, aside from quick mentions of his family and childhood friend Gil Antotoi. Perhaps most striking is Wallace's striking depiction of the Midwestern silence and open space – the essay's

inactivity reflects the quietness itself. Like the other essays previously mentioned, there is actual information, although not a specific argument, that Wallace desires to impart upon his readers, and he does it with ease. “Derivative Sport in Tornado Alley” is striking as a biographical essay only when compared to the other two essays in the collection – “A Supposedly Fun Thing I’ll Never Do Again” and “Getting Away from Already Being Pretty Much Away from It All,” which are actually not supposed to be biographical at all.

Wallace acts as character-narrator in all three of the latter essays, but while “Derivative Sport” is biographical, “A Supposedly Fun Thing” and “Getting Away” are, as Wallace explicitly reveals within the essays, news assignments by *Harpers* magazine. Wallace’s first person role as character-narrator transforms from natural, comfortable, and controlled to pronouncedly and painfully self aware in the journalistic pieces. Wallace’s approach to “A Supposedly Fun Thing” and “Getting Away” differ immensely from the biographical essay. Again, we can refer to Hayden White’s insight on fiction and reality: the events in “Derivative Sport” seem to “speak themselves,” which White suggests is natural in a fictional discourse. Although autobiography is not a fictional genre, it is the personal expression of the individual experience, and it seems natural that there is no real referential reality, that the events would “speak themselves” (8). The two journalistic pieces could be considered autobiographical episodes, as there is a large amount of personal information about Wallace and his reaction to the event upon which is reporting, but there is great contrast between “Derivative Sport” and the *Harpers* articles, despite their mutual non-fictional genre.

The journalistic pieces are just as deliberately and artistically narrated as Wallace’s fictional pieces, but do not call attention to this artistry, as *Broom of The System* and *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men* do. Wallace’s forceful assertion of himself as likeable character-narrator and his depiction of his own “otherness” is as much a subject of the journalistic pieces as the cruise or the fair themselves. In both of the essays, his first person point of view and his identity as both narrator and main character result in a non-fiction piece that is just as highly designed as *Broom of the System*, but which anxiously utilizes

many of the same tactics which are questioned in his fiction. This hovering anxiety and intense feeling of discomfort seems to be rooted in Wallace's effort to honestly write nonfiction and the difficulty in depicting a world in which there is a referential reality. In "A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again," he describes a tragedy that happened on board a cruise ship: "The news version was that it had been an unhappy adolescent love thing, a shipboard romance gone bad, etc. I think part of it was something else, something there's no way a *real* news story could cover" (261, emphasis added). The very next sentence begins to cover this very thing: "There is something about a mass-market Luxury Cruise that is unbearably sad" (261). In doing so, Wallace both suggests that his story is not a "real news story," and also touches upon the value of it not being so, because of some aspect of life that escapes real news.<sup>4</sup>

Wallace's identity as character-narrator of "A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again" is defined by a pattern between alienating himself from the group and identifying with readers. This pattern coincides with his ability to be both an astute narrator while also winning reader hearts as pathetic, humorous, introverted main character with which readers can relate. The way in which Wallace characterizes himself is vital to the mediation of the events; the essay is far more an experience of him rather than that of the cruise. The artistic rendering of his own identity and the events on the cruise ship reveal embrace, rather than identify or reject (like *Broom*), the malleability in the rendering of reality.

Wallace mixes his identity as hyperintelligent, hyperaware, philosophical, dark, deep writer and narrator with his relatable, foolish, honest, sensitive one-of-us character personality, creating our very own character-narrator who continually places himself outside the group, in the observer position, and then back inside of it, in a pattern of in and out, in and out, in and out. Wallace establishes himself as outside of the general population on the boat in lots of small ways – but most strikingly are the dark, unsettling images he grants readers; he steadily defamiliarizes and deconstructs the weak foundation of the happy façade on the ship itself. He presents us with his feeling of intense despair aboard the ship: "It's more like wanting to die in order to escape the unbearable feeling of becoming aware that I'm small and

weak and and selfish and going without any doubt at all to die. It's wanting to jump overboard" (261). He describes the "'Singles Get Together' (sic)" as "a true wrist slitter" with the "few singles under like 70 all look[ing] grim and self-hypnotized," and follows this with a description of relaxation as "death-and-dread-transcendence the *Nadir* offers" (264-5). Wallace touches upon how the attention of his maid makes him sad, asking,

"I mean, if pampering and radical kindness don't seem motivated by strong affection and thus don't somehow affirm one or help assure one that one is not, finally, a dork, of what final and significant value is all this indulgence and cleaning?" (299).

In this question, he briefly touches what the nature of genuine motives that come from within that create actions of interaction – a connection between self and other – versus actions that reflect only environment, actions that are self-referential and self serving – with no origin or destination whatsoever. These are issues that are in the forefront of *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men* with "Suicide as Sort of a Present." Wallace depicts this sentiment in a much more personal, less serious and consequential way in his first person account in the essay, utilizing his general likeability to connect with the readers rather than the disturbing nature of the short story.

Among these gigantic questions of despair, fear, and connection which strike Wallace out of every day cruise banalities, is another theme, which Wallace states, "may be *the* Big one, come to think of it," is the unkeepable promise of the *Nadir* to satisfy the "Dissatisfied Infant part of [him], the part that always and indiscriminately WANTS (316). Wallace debases the easy, fun reasoning of the *Nadir*'s endless relaxation and fun and cuts to our reaching out for the Lacanian *objet petit a*, for wholeness, and that this desire is both catered to and generated over and over by our relationship with consumerism – how everything is actually more "deeply dissatisfying" after catering to the need: Wallace's image of *jouissance* (316). Wallace's commentates on the *Nadir*'s promise to fulfill all needs: "This is a big one, this lie," and then footnoted, "It may well be *the* Big one, come to think of it" (316). Apart from his exploration of such a deep issue, with this footnote, it is as if he is actually providing the readers explicitly with the theme or general argument in his essay. While this identifies Wallace as an analyst of

his own work, “othering” him from the general population as well as readers, it also works as an excellent example of his honest on-your-side character identity and balances the dark, unsettling observations about the Nadir.

While Wallace’s wide ranging, deep, dark, and unsettling commentary identifies him as an observer and a writer, his humorous self deprecation and goofiness allow him to act as companion to the readers. Although Wallace regularly asserts himself as an introvert and disconnected from population of the ship, he does not frame himself as a Byronic hero, superior and isolated, but rather as socially awkward, anxious and goofy. He describes his obsession with sharks: “I made such a fuss about the one (possible) dorsal fin I saw off starboard that my companions at supper’s Table 64, had to tell me, with all possible tact, to shut up about the fin already,” then depicts, in a footnote, how this transforms from amusing social ineptitude to the near-botching of his journalistic assignment:

“on the very first night of the 7NC cruise I asked the staff...whether I could have a spare bucket of au jus drippings from supper so I could try chumming for sharks off the back rail of the top deck, and that this request struck everybody from the maitre d’ on down as disturbing and maybe even disturbed, and that is turned out to be a serious journalistic faux pas, because I’m almost positive the maitre d’ passed this disturbing tidbit on to Mr. Dermatitis and that it was the big reason why I was denied access to stuff like the ship’s galley, thereby impoverishing the sensuous scope of this article” (262)

His anxious and eccentric demeanor start as humorous social interactions but then move up a register into his work: Wallace is expert at asserting his normality, his relatable demeanor – his “faux pas” screams “See, I’m like you, I can hardly do this either, or at least not the correct way!” We see this again as he plays with expectations of an informative essay as he states, “I now know the maximum cruising speed of a cruise ship in knots,” footnoted and undermined by grammatically messy “(though I never did *get clear* on just what a knot is)” (258, emphasis added). He frames himself as a likeable Homer Simpson figure, genuine in motive but unable to deliver. Of course, this becomes what Wallace is actually delivering – the information slips through the cracks but the experience of being so humorously human remains striking, relatable, hilarious. His footnoted voice acts as a reader’s companion, a more secret place in which the embarrassing truth can be told. In both of these examples, there is a transparency that



Wallace makes use of in his narrating tone to connect with his audience. His deliberate depiction of himself works in a pattern of statement followed by destabilization of that statement – this is part of the experience of reading Wallace. As mediator, he explicitly decides to simulate the process of decision/mistake, endeavor/failure, to relate and connect with the audience. It is a genius form which presents him as more honest, self aware, wider reaching than a first-person narrator – he lives as both himself and his own critic.

Wallace also emphasizes his own transparency and dependability, and the value of the essay itself, by posing against the magazine industry, advertisements, and Frank Conroy. He starts out by characterizing his contacts at *Harpers*: “They are sort of disingenuous, I believe, these magazine people. They say all they want is a sort of really big experiential postcard” (257). There is anxiety generated here about a need for a point, a cause, an argument that originates in the pressure that Wallace feels surrounding the essay. Of course, there is also the comedic move that this insight about his *Harpers* contacts will run in the *Harpers*, characterizing him as a jokester and a pseudorebel. The essay follows this line of question about the function and ethics of writing as Wallace introduces the issue of Frank Conroy writing an essay for the cruise company and their presentation of it.

“Conroy’s ‘essay’ appears as an insert, on skinnier pages and with different margins from the rest of the brochure, creating the impression that it has been excerpted from large and objective thing that Conroy wrote. But it hasn’t been. The truth is that Celebrity Cruises paid Frank Conroy upfront to write it...In other words, Celebrity Cruises is presenting Conroy’s review of his 7NC Cruise as an essay and not a commercial. This is extremely bad....Whether it honors them well or not, an essay’s fundamental obligations are supposed to be to the reader...But a commercial is a very different animal” (288).

Whatever reader response to Foster Wallace’s ethical viewpoints, he has now said, upfront, that a writer has obligations to the reader in essays – asserting his own honesty and fulfillment of these obligations. While Wallace obtains Conroy’s admission: “I prostituted myself,” he continues on to connect him again to Celebrity Cruises and their false intentions: “(with the active complicity of Professor Conroy, I’m afraid),” sort of rubbing in his involvement (289). In all of this, Wallace positions himself as revealer, as honest, upfront, and sincere. What is striking about all of this positioning – as dark,

philosophical other, balanced with foolish introvert, combined to create our genuine character-narrator, truth revealer – is that Wallace is also messing, like Frank Conroy, with a genre. He makes use of extensive self characterization, conventionally expected in fiction, really rendering much of the essay as more of a short story, within an argumentative, objective form of ‘essay.’ Much of the body of the piece is devoted to establishing relationship between narrator and reader, setting Wallace’s identity as our guide rather than being truly informative.

Of course, Wallace’s eccentric use of form, his own presence and anxieties as author within the text, and his transparency of narration and desire to present himself and his motives fully are responding to the immature idea that a non-fiction narrator can even be unbiased at all. Wallace must include his presence in the text because that is just how it is – he is there. However, it seems clear that his merging of creative self characterization, his self deprecation, and his role as modest truth-revealer also jeopardize the earnestness of the genre essay as well. Wallace’s narration in “A Supposedly Fun Thing I’ll Never Do Again” contrasts greatly with that of *Broom of the System*. In his essay, which is expected to represent reality in some way or another, he becomes all things – Great Grandma Lenore, controlling the story, Rick and the omniscient narrator rolled into one, telling with his debilitating insecurity and anxiety, as well as the arranger, displacing time and events into footnotes. While *Broom of the System* provides a referential reality to reveal the reach and biases of these characters by displacing them into different functions, “A Supposedly Fun Thing I’ll Never Do Again” is completely controlled by character-narrator David Foster Wallace. This is interesting on another level as well – we have to wonder, is Wallace’s expression in his essay more honest because he admits he is controlling it all, whereas in his novel he creates the illusion of a referential reality? Reader expectations play into this greatly – while an essay’s “obligations are supposed to be to the reader” and objectivity, or at least clarity, a novel has an entirely different set of expectations or obligations – to entertain, to connect, and on into infinity – but not really any commonly perceived obligation to be especially honest. These questions are present both in

Wallace's essays and are part of Lenore's conflict in *Broom* – how telling is controlling, how it traps people within a system of narrative – and come to the forefront in his essay about the fair.

“Getting Away from Pretty Much Already Being Away from It All,” uses similar tactics in the establishment of a pattern in which the character-narrator establishes itself as inside, then outside, then inside, then outside, etc. of the group. In “A Supposedly Fun Thing I’ll Never Do Again,” Wallace’s otherness from readers is made up by his dark, unsettling images and deep philosophical voice, while his relation to readers is created by his goofy introverted personality and transparent, genuine narrator voice. In the essay about the fair, Wallace does utilize the goofiness, undermining his abilities as a writer to connect with the audience, but the alienation of his character functions in a different way than on the cruise. At the fair, Wallace goes between identifying as a Midwesterner and understanding himself as superior to them, as a sort of liberated Midwesterner who is able make key insights with his biographical expertise. So, within the story, readers understand Wallace feeling as though he is the other at the fair, but within the reader-audience relationship, this otherness allows them to relate to him. Readers of *Harpers*, “a certain swanky East-coast magazine,” are interested in Wallace’s abstracted, intellectual insight about the backward Midwesterners (257). Overall, Wallace’s balanced expression of himself as both common Midwesterner and intellectual allows him to successfully act as mediator between his audience and the foreign land of the fair.

There are two different groups who Wallace positions himself to relate with – the population at the fair, and the reader. The latter occurs through a more complex process which entails both his goofiness and superiority characteristics. In “Getting Away from Supposedly Being Away from It All,” Wallace largely alienates himself from the other fairgoers, but does paradoxically group himself with them as well. He states, “Illinois’ complete lack of ethnic identity creates a kind of postmodern embarrassment of riches – foods of every culture and creed become *our* own” (103, emphasis added). He characterizes dancers that are “jagged and arrhythmic and blank, bored in that hip young East-coast-taught way” as “unspeakably lonely and numb,” implicitly denoting something warmer about Midwestern

culture (126). Overall, however, Wallace connects to his reader, and equalizes himself to the other fair-goers, with his goofy, foolish personality, through which he undermines himself.

Wallace opens the essay with a humorous, transparent tone: “I’ve never been considered press before. My main interest in Credentials is getting into rides and stuff for free” (83). This childish, comedic quality is perpetuated by his lack of professional readiness: “It occurs to me I probably should’ve brought a notebook,” and later, “I’d bought a notebook, but I left the car windows down last night and it got ruined by the rain” (85, 91). Like his interaction with the sharks, his foolishness in daily life is kicked up a register into his ability to write within his own writing, to undermine him as controlling, superior narrator, making him more relatable to the reader. As with “A Supposedly Fun Thing,” Wallace deliberately simulates experiences of embarrassment, instead of describing them, again, creating a stronger connection with his reader. Native Companion calls him Slug, and Wallace suggests, “(Ignore the nickname)” and then again “(The nickname’s a long story; ignore it)” (100-1). Of course, this all minimizes the fact that Wallace, as mediator, need not mention that she called him Slug at all – he is artfully forming an impression of himself as both insider and outsider of the community, as well as humanizing and creating comic relief with such a ridiculous name. He uses narrative gap similarly:

“8/14/ 1025 h. Dessert Competitions.

8/14/1315h. Illinois State Fair Infirmary; then motel; then Springfield Memorial Medical Center Emergency Room...then motel; incapacitated till well after sunset; whole day a washout; incredibly embarrassing; unprofessional; indescribable. Delete entire day” (111).

Again he serves as comic relief, and touches upon his power as narrator with “Delete entire day.”

As mediator, he has the physical power to do this – but realizes it is more powerful to make use of the embarrassment to characterize himself. His earnest embarrassment to hide what has happened is depicted actually he has called even more attention to it – which is a great simulation of the experience of humiliation. All of this creates an affinity between Wallace and his readers, as well as equalizes him with the Midwestern population. Wallace creates a depth that is not frequently present in first person narration; he both presents and embarrasses himself.

While Wallace's role as comic relief is a point of overlap that connects him both to the readers and the people at the fair, his other tactics connect him largely to the West Coast readers through an alienation from the Midwesterners. Wallace utilizes the minor character of the Native Companion to emphasize his immense difference from other Midwesterners despite his origins there, positioning himself as the perfect mediator between his *Harpers* audience and the fair.

Wallace characterizes himself as a "pith-helmeted anthropologist," and shows his seriousness: "No anthropologist worth his helmet would be without the shrewd counsel of a colorful local, and I've brought a Native Companion here for the day" (83, 90). Of course, the character of the anthropologist carries the baggage of the tendentious civilization-savage power relation, and reignites the issue of the authority of the narrator and their ability to form reality around their telling. Wallace uses the contrast between him and his Native Companion to alienate himself from the fairgoers, likely with his "swanky west coast" readers in mind. He theorizes to Native Companion and she, "rummaging for her lighter, is about as interested in this stuff as she was about the child-as-empiricist-God-delusion horseshit back in the car, she apprises me" (92). Readers, however, are the captive audience of Wallace's theorizing in their decision to continue on through the text with him as mediator. He characterizes himself as more complex, pensive, and intellectual than the Native Companion; strengthening reader relationship with him through her alienation. Native Companion is representative of Wallace's origin she "worked detassling summer corn with [him] in high school" (91). She is the projection of his past identity, his Midwesternness, the readers' personal interaction with the other,

"these people who ask of life only a Republican in the White House and a black velvet Elvis on the wood-grain mantel of their mobile home. They're not hurting anybody. A good third of the people I went to high school with now probably wear these T-shirts, and proudly" (122).

Despite Wallace's intention to relate, he actually comes off as even more of an "East-coast snob" in this excerpt, simplifying and generalizing the desires of an entire population; acting as he understands them fully through their external expressions. As Woloch states, "Narrative progress always entails a series of choices: each choice magnifies or stints others," and as Wallace grants his attention to the

creation of an affinity between him and the reader, he has no time to humanize the savage Midwesterners, they must remain depersonalized in their minority for the sake of the argument, functioning as the other (12). This relationship between he and our very own Midwestern savage, the Native Companion, comes to its high point (pun intended) as the fairgoers look up her skirt when she rides The Zipper and the gap between their respective reactions – from Wallace: “A less sensitive neurological specimen probably would have stepped in at this point and stopped the whole grotesque exercise. My own makeup leans more toward disassociation when under stress” followed by a list of what is going on around him, and then later, “Am I the only one who was in touch with the manifestly overt sexual-harassment element in this whole episode?” (99-100). Wallace’s reaction, despite his disgust, is to better fulfill his role as narrator. He disassociates by depicting the scene, aligning him directly with Rick Vigorous. Through this disassociation, through his telling, he maintains control of the situation and his own feelings in some way.

Native Companion’s reaction contrasts greatly: “So if I noticed or I didn’t, why does it have to be *my* deal? What, because there’s assholes in the world I don’t get to ride on The Zipper? I don’t get to ever spin? Maybe I shouldn’t ever go to the pool or ever get all girled up, just out of fear of assholes?” (101). Whereas Wallace is paralyzed by the indignity of the situation, Native Companion maintains an understanding of her own choices versus the external chaos that surrounds her, aligning her with Wang Dang Lang, in his assertion to Lenore, “That’s my sad, not your sad” (Broom 418). Aside from all of the connections to “anonymous” culture and codependency, the situation emphasizes the contrast in the roles of Wallace and Native Companion; she walks away saying, “Buy me some pork skins, you dipshit,” and he, “This may just sort of the regional politico-sexual contrast the swanky East-Coast magazine is keen for,” launching his assertion outward toward the readers, “This could be integral” (101-2). Their inability to connect brings Wallace closer to the reader, who is the true audience of his transparent, metafictional processing of the scene. Native Companion is positioned as a minor, exclusively functional character within the diegesis, and then again in his plan to express that diegesis.

Again, Wallace's depiction of himself as character-narrator likens itself to Rick Vigorous' control through narration rather than action. This can be understood as in line with Wallace's ethical point of view that an essay's "fundamental obligation are supposed to be to the reader" that he asserts in "A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again." It is as though Wallace takes up his "swanky west coast" readers' standpoints about Midwesterners – but can this be considered an obligation? It seems more imbued with a deep desire to be liked, accepted, and in some way, stands in conflict with his critique of commercialism – there is no way to avoid that Wallace must consider his audience and their desires so that he can sell his narrative, and therefore himself as a character-narrator, to them. As Wallace would put it, it "stinks" highly of the paradoxes that surround Herman Melville's "The Paradise of Bachelors and Tartarus of Maids," a short story critiquing the terrible conditions in paper factories but also published in *Harpers* on that very paper, belying primarily a desire to feed reader desire for socially aware fiction, while also utilizing the subjugated population in this feeding.

Wallace's utilization of his Native Companion to emphasize his relationship with the reader and alienation from the Midwesterners becomes even more complex when considered with information external to the text. According to biographer D.T. Max, The Native Companion is actually Victoria Harris, daughter of his friends from Boston, whom he barely knew. Max suggests that Harris became a composite of his female attachments from back home, his sister, and Susie Perkins, one of his first romantic involvements (186). Wallace's editor also questioned the plausibility of events in the story as well, and when "Wallace was coy," he gave in – "If Wallace wrote it, it aided *narrative energy*, and could not be disproven when the piece was fact-checked, it could run" (186, emphasis added). Max even suggests that Wallace's parts of characterization of himself was "likely made up, but [his] exaggerated stance toward the trauma of childhood captured something that readers began to want from him" (186). Wallace's willingness to manipulate events within the story transcends his blind anthropologist identity, his desire to create an affinity with readers, and reaches a place in which he actually alters events and makes up characters – which sounds a lot more like a short story than an essay. This falls upon the line

between an argument, the central key to an essay, and a theme, or a lesson, or even the type of thing that “A certain East-coast swanky magazine is keen for” (101).

Certainly, the gap between Wallace’s experience at the fair and his rendering of it affects our experience, and specifically disrupts our reading of the Native Companion. Overall, we can understand that Victoria Harris came with Wallace, with the same outlook as him – the Native Companion readers know, detassler of corn, rummager of lighter, desirer of pork skins – is a character specifically created to function as Wallace’s foil and emphasize his affinity with the reader. No one is calling him “Slug,” making him relatable with his embarrassing nickname, positioning him as a liberated Midwesterner with feet in both sides. We know Wallace’s “obligation” to the *Harpers* reader, but where falls his obligation to the genre of the essay or the characters, to the representation of female Midwesterners? Initially, the Native Companion seems simplified and depersonalized, abstract[ed] into functionality just unrealistically excludes qualities that are particular and significant,” for the balance of the narrative, but as a completely fabricated character, Wallace’s essay moves from any type of argument about the Midwest into an essay largely preoccupied with an assertion of himself (Woloch 27).

His depiction of the Native companion as a real, albeit humorous, representation of a Midwestern woman when she actually is simply an idea corresponds the Lenore’s anxiety of “telling as robbing control,” strongly aligning Wallace with Rick, who, as Lenore suspects, tells to maintain control, to argue his own point of view and subjugate the other. The Native Companion stands in dialogue and contrast to Wallace’s multilayered depiction of Lenore Beadsman: while Wallace’s character –narrator identity, which we see more fully developed and decisive in “A Supposedly Fun Thing I’ll Never Do Again,” reduces Native Companion to a self-referential function, the multi-layered displacement of narration in *Broom* endeavors to dynamically and genuinely imbue Lenore with human ambiguity. There are issues of narcissism and its inherence in human relations that are pervasive in all of Wallace’s works – while his essays leave these matters largely unquestioned, his fiction consistently confronts and acknowledges them. Of course, there is the idea, implicit in the easy readability and positive reviews of Wallace’s non-



fiction essays, that this is the more honest, natural state of the humanity – that there exists little desire to escape our first person, paranoid existence, whatever the sacrifices to “aid narrative energy” are involved (Max 186).

David Foster Wallace’s approach to looming issues such as gender relations and human relations as a whole and their connection with inherent narcissism changes drastically between his fiction and non-fiction works. Both *Broom of the System* and *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men* utilize fragmentation and an arranger to create a regularly changing hierarchy that makes evident issues of power between narrator, author, and character. The two non-fiction essays considered here utilize a consistent narrative flow with a union between author, narrator, and main character. While the displacement of these aspects in his fiction allows for exploration, Wallace’s first person accounts also depict the isolation inherent in the individual experience, which the fiction works also endeavor to do. When we consider how the works interact with one another, it is evident that Wallace considers the inescapability of his authorship in his depiction of female characters, while both embracing and considering his own human experience in his non-fiction essays. There is a bountiful amount of information and research waiting to be conducted about Wallace’s own idea of himself as a hideous man and metafiction as authorial narcissism. Overall, the fiction and non-fiction pieces are united by their ability to capture reader attention and empathy and to present endlessly nuanced and revealing suggestions about our experience.

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<sup>1</sup> “Arranger” is rooted in *Ulysses*, termed by Hugh Kenner and David Hayman. Kenner describes, “It is not the voice a storyteller, not a voice at all, since it does not even speak” (65). While the arranger in *Ulysses* speaks alongside the narrator in *Ulysses*, I am more using the term more for the actual presence that is arranging the fragments together into the novel and the collection of short stories – the thing that imbues the works with significance through juxtaposition and chronology in its mediation. In *Broom*, the arranger is someone with access to private diaries, psychologist transcripts, and other physical fragments from the diegesis, but also pairs them with narration.

<sup>2</sup> Lenore’s assigned role as “main character” is very interesting – Woloch suggests that a flat character is made flat by the “disassociation of infinite interior from capturable exterior” (24). While the novel does not depict Lenore’s infinite interior, there does not seem to be a disassociation taking place from her capturable exterior. Instead, Lenore’s mainness seems to be related to the other characters, as well as the arranger’s, preoccupation with her mysterious infinite interior. In other words, Lenore definitely has an infinite interior, and Wallace seems to emphasize this mysterious infinity by locating it just out of reach.

<sup>3</sup> Also, coincidentally, how my mom described her experience trying to read *Infinite Jest*, per my suggestion.